

CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH

Second Appearance of Jicks

FIVE more days passed.

During that interval, we saw our new neighbor constantly. Either Oscar came to the rectory, or we went to Browndown. Reverend Finch waited, with a masterly assumption of suspecting nothing, until the relations between the two young people were ripe enough to develop into relations of acknowledged love. They were already (under Lucilla's influence) advancing rapidly to that point. You are not to blame my poor blind girl, if you please, for frankly encouraging the man she loved. He was the most backward man--viewed as a suitor--whom I ever met with. The fonder he grew of her, the more timid and self-distrustful he became. I own I don't like a modest man; and I cannot honestly say that Mr. Oscar Dubourg, on closer acquaintance, advanced himself much in my estimation. However, Lucilla understood him, and that was enough. She was determined to have the completest possible image of him in her mind. Everybody in the house who had seen him (the children included) she examined and cross-examined on the subject of his personal appearance, as she had already examined and cross-examined me. His features and his color, his height and his breadth; his ornaments and his clothes--on all these points she collected evidence, in every direction and in the smallest detail. It was an especial relief and delight to her to hear, on all sides, that his complexion was fair. There was no reasoning with her against her blind horror of dark shades of color, whether seen in men, women, or things. She was quite unable to account for it; she could only declare it.

"I have the strangest instincts of my own about some things," she said to me one day. "For instance, I knew that Oscar was bright and fair--I mean I felt it in myself--on that delightful evening when I first heard the sound of his voice. It went straight from my ear to my heart; and it described him, just as the rest of you have described him to me since. Mrs. Finch tells me his complexion is lighter than mine. Do you think so too? I am so glad to hear that he is fairer than I am! Did you ever meet before with a person like me? I have the oddest ideas in this blind head of mine. I associate life and beauty with light colors, and death and crime with dark colors. If I married a man with a dark complexion, and if I recovered my sight afterwards, I should run away from him."

This singular prejudice of hers against dark people was a little annoying to me on personal grounds. It was a sort of reflection on my own taste. Between ourselves, the late Doctor Pratolungo was of a fine mahogany brown all over.

As for affairs in general at Dimchurch, my chronicle of the five days finds little to dwell on that is worth recording.

We were not startled by any second appearance of the two ruffians at Browndown--neither was any change made by Oscar in his domestic establishment. He was favored with more than one visit from our little wandering Jicks. On each occasion, the child gravely reminded him of his rash promise to appeal to the police, and visit with corporal punishment the two ugly strangers who had laughed at her. When were the men to be beaten? and when was Jicks to see it? Such were the serious questions with which this young lady regularly opened the proceedings, on each occasion when she favored Oscar with a morning call.

On the sixth day, the gold and silver plates were returned to Browndown from the manufactory in London.

The next morning a note arrived for me from Oscar. It ran thus:--

"DEAR MADAME PRATOLUNGO,--I regret to inform you that nothing happened to me last night. My locks and bolts are in their usual good order; my gold and silver plates are safe in the workshop: and I myself am now eating my breakfast with an uncut throat--Yours ever,

"OSCAR."

After this, there was no more to be said. Jicks might persist in remembering the two ill-looking strangers. Older and wiser people dismissed them from all further consideration.

Saturday came--making the tenth day since the memorable morning when I had forced Oscar to disclose himself to me in the little side-room at Browndown.

In the forenoon we had a visit from him at the rectory. In the afternoon we went to Browndown, to see him begin a new piece of chasing in gold--a casket for holding gloves--destined to take its place on Lucilla's toilet-table when it was done. We left him industriously at work; determined to go on as long as the daylight lasted.

Early in the evening, Lucilla sat down at her pianoforte; and I paid a visit by appointment to the rectory side of the house.

Unhappy Mrs. Finch had determined to institute a complete reform of her wardrobe. She had entreated me to give her the benefit of "my French taste," in the capacity of confidential critic and adviser. "I can't afford to buy any new things," said the poor lady. "But a deal might be done in altering what I have got by me, if a clever person took the matter up." Who could resist that piteous appeal? I resigned myself to the baby, the novel, and the children in general; and (Reverend Finch being out of the way, writing his sermon) I presented myself in Mrs. Finch's parlor, full of ideas, with my scissors and my pattern-paper ready in my hand.

We had only begun our operations, when one of the elder children arrived with a message from the nursery.

It was tea-time; and, as usual, Jicks was missing. She was searched for, first in the lower regions of the house; secondly in the garden. Not a trace of her was to be discovered in either quarter. Nobody was surprised or alarmed. We said, "Oh, dear, she has gone to Browndown again!"--and immersed ourselves once more in the shabby recesses of Mrs. Finch's wardrobe.

I had just decided that the blue merino jacket was an article of wearing apparel which had done its duty, and earned its right to final retirement from the scene--when a plaintive cry reached my ear, through the open door which led into the back garden.

I stopped, and looked at Mrs. Finch.

The cry was repeated, louder and nearer: recognizable this time as a cry in a child's voice. The door of the room had been left ajar, when we sent the messenger back to the nursery. I threw it open, and found myself face to face with Jicks in the passage.

I felt every nerve in my body shudder at the sight of the child.

The poor little thing was white and wild with terror. She was incapable of uttering a word. When I knelt down to fondle and soothe her, she caught convulsively at my hand, and attempted to raise me. I got on my feet again. She repeated her dumb cry more loudly--and tried to drag me out of the house. She was so weak that she staggered under the effort. I took her up in

my arms. One of my hands, as I embraced her, touched the top of her frock, just below the back of her neck. I felt something on my fingers. I looked at them. Gracious God! I was stained with blood!

I turned the child round. My own blood froze. Her mother, standing behind me, screamed with horror.

The dear little thing's white frock was spotted and splashed with wet blood. Not her own blood. There was not a scratch on her. I looked closer at the horrid marks. They had been drawn purposely on her--drawn, as it seemed, with a finger. I took her out into the light. It was writing! A word had been feebly traced on the back of her frock. I made out something like the letter "H." Then a letter which it was impossible to read.

Then another next to it, which might have been "L," or might have been "J." Then a last letter, which I guessed to be "P."

Was the word--"Help"?

Yes!--traced on the back of the child's frock, with a finger dipped in blood--
"HELP."